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## **‘Per-tras-versioni’ dantesche**

**Post-Paradisiacal Constellations in the Poetry of Vittorio Sereni and Andrea Zanzotto**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is a study of language disorders in two works by twentieth-century poets in dialogue with Dante’s *Paradiso*: Vittorio Sereni’s *Un posto di vacanza* (1971) and Andrea Zanzotto’s ‘Oltranza ol-traggio’ (1968). The constellations that I will focus on are linguistic, and the specific ‘disorder’ I want to consider is aphasia — the dissolution of language. Charting the way in which Sereni and Zanzotto construct the universes of their poems as ‘per-tras-versioni’ of their Dantean counterpart — something ‘turned aside’ or ‘diverted’, which ‘cuts across’ the ideal, Dantean scheme — I will show how, in different ways, the intertextual dialogue between modern and medieval author manifests itself as a ‘resemanticization’ of the language of *Paradiso* or, better, of that coming-into-language of desire and the poem which, textually speaking, Dante’s third canticle takes as its alpha and omega.

# ‘PER-TRAS-VERSIONI’ DANTESCHE

Post-Paradisiacal Constellations in the  
Poetry of Vittorio Sereni and Andrea Zanzotto<sup>1</sup>

Francesca Southerden

This paper is a study of language disorders in two works by twentieth-century poets in dialogue with Dante’s *Paradiso*: Vittorio Sereni’s *Un posto di vacanza* (1971) and Andrea Zanzotto’s ‘Oltranza oltraggio’ (1968).<sup>2</sup> The constellations that I will focus on are linguistic, and the specific ‘disorder’ I want to consider is aphasia – the dissolution of language.<sup>3</sup> Charting the way in which Sereni and Zanzotto construct the universes of their poems as ‘per-tras-versioni’ of their Dantean counterpart – something ‘turned aside’ or ‘diverted’, which ‘cuts across’ the ideal, Dantean scheme – I will show how, in different ways, the intertextual dialogue between modern and medieval author manifests itself as a ‘resemanticization’ of the language of *Paradiso* or, better, of that coming-into-language of desire and the poem which, textually speaking, Dante’s third canticle takes as its alpha and omega.<sup>4</sup>

To this extent, it is helpful to begin from the end, focusing on two *terzine* in *Paradiso* XXXIII that deal with Dante-poet’s inability to render his final vision in language. I believe that the two primary motifs we encounter here – the experience of ‘oltraggio’ (linguistic-memorial ek-stasis) and that of the ‘punto [...] letargo’ of oblivion – become the structuring tropes for Sereni’s and Zanzotto’s own journeys to the very limits of expression:

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio  
che ’l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede,  
e cede la memoria a tanto *oltraggio*.  
(*Par.* XXXIII, 55–57)

*Un punto solo m’è maggior letargo*  
che venticinque anni a la ’mpresa  
che fé Nettuno ammirar l’ombra d’Argo.  
(*Par.* XXXIII, 94–96)

These tropes embody the particularity of the problem that Dante faces in writing the *Paradiso*, a canticle whose essence lies in the pre-textual, wordless reality that he must still somehow bring into his poem. While the pilgrim's vision approximates itself ever more fully to the *visio Dei*, the poet struggles to hold on to that vision in memory or to recreate it in words. Strained to the very limits of articulation, and often bordering on silence, Dante's discourse carries the double sign of its success and failure (its loss as well as its joy) and, above all, the aporia of a language that would speak, by not speaking, of that which no language can speak.<sup>5</sup>

I want to argue that this is a dimension of Dante's text to which both Sereni and Zanzotto are drawn. But in their own post-structuralist universes, devoid of God, they will recuperate this experience as one of foundational, linguistic trauma, centred on the impossibility of recovering an originally lost object that is severed from the subject with the birth of the sign.<sup>6</sup> Looking at the 'disorders of language' that present themselves in their poems, I will argue that these modern poets refigure the problem of language in *Paradiso* – always bordering on aphasia – as the much more negative condition of what is known (following Kristeva's designation of it in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*) as 'asymbolia'. Here, asymbolia is defined as the loss of meaning or reference or the collapse of meaning into the unnameable, which Kristeva aligns with the language of the melancholic:

Finally, when the frugal musicality becomes exhausted in its turn, or simply does not succeed in becoming established on account of the *pressure of silence*, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the *blankness of asymbolia* or the *excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos*.<sup>7</sup>

As will become clear, poetically speaking, Sereni suffers from the first condition, Zanzotto the second. Sereni will reappropriate the aphasic system of Dante's *Paradiso* as one of mutism: the failure to speak, the refusal to translate the world into language, to symbolize or to elaborate discourse. Zanzotto, instead, will embrace it as one of linguistic excess – logorrhoea, agrammatism, and verbal chaos: the meaningless proliferation of signs without sense, the stigma of a poet who, if you like, has always already overstepped the mark ('trapassato il segno', *Par.* XXVI, 115–17) linguistically speaking. As I will argue, these are antithetical but complementary responses to perceiving the 'vanishing

point' of language, something which (as Teodolinda Barolini has shown) Dante constantly glimpses and rehearses throughout the latter half of the *Paradiso*, before the poem actually cedes to its end – an end implicit from the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

#### DANTE'S *PARADISO*

My argument thus begins with Dante, and with the 'language disorder' of aphasia that his *Paradiso* would represent, which has recently been the subject of a fascinating study by Elena Lombardi in *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante*. As she states, if 'poetic language is always threatened by aphasia' (non-language, silence), this becomes a particularly strenuous issue in the *Paradiso* where 'language paradoxically "hides" because of its own fullness of meaning', where the sign becomes redundant and is only present as a product of the poem and the human intellect.<sup>9</sup> 'No element of semiosis or grammar is stable anymore' and this 'mutant language' – as Lombardi terms the language of heaven – can be made comprehensible only through the imposition of signs, which come into play as 'part of condescension' ('per *far segno*', *Par.* IV, 38), to accommodate the still-limited faculties of the pilgrim to perceive the full splendour of beatitude, for the poet to write his text, and for us to read it (since it would not exist otherwise).<sup>10</sup>

As Barolini has argued, the enterprise involved in this supreme, linguistic task of figuring the *Paradiso* is on a Ulyssean scale.<sup>11</sup> It is the problem of a discourse that must become progressively more transgressive – more 'equalized', more 'lyrical', more 'non-discursive, nonlinear or circular, "dechronologized," and affective',<sup>12</sup> i.e. less like itself – the closer the pilgrim gets to his ultimate goal and to his union with the Godhead, something signalled to the reader as early as *Paradiso* I:

Trasumanar significar *per verba*  
non si poria; però l'esempio basti  
a cui l'esperienza grazia serba.  
(*Par.* I, 70–72; italics in the original)

'Trasumanar': I want to suggest that, textually speaking, neologisms of this kind mark the points in Dante's *Paradiso* at which we glimpse something like the beginning and the end of language. They are at

once the poet's acknowledgement of the limits of his language and of the poem, as well as his ability to make them travel further than ever before. Here, in fact, a new language is born that would incorporate the 'other' or 'outside' of language while maintaining its difference from it: on the one hand, a part of the 'far segno' that counters the aphasic system of the *Paradiso* just outlined, and on the other, a sign of the self-consciously Ulyssean enterprise that this involves. Thinking back to the two *terzine* with which I began from *Par.* XXXIII, and looking forward to Sereni's and Zanzotto's transposition of this dimension of language into their own poems, I want to suggest that Dante's neologisms can be categorized into two groups as follows:

- (A) Words of extent/measure – under the sign of 'oltraggio'
  - 'trasumanar' (*Par.* I, 70); 's'impenna' (*Par.* X, 74); 's'innoltra' (*Par.* XXI, 94); 'si trasmoda' (*Par.* XXX, 20); 'trasvolare' (*Par.* XXXII, 90); 'oltrarti' (*Par.* XXXII, 146)
- (B) Words of identity – under the sign of 'punto'
  - 'inciela' (*Par.* III, 97); 's'india' (*Par.* IV, 28); 's'incinqua' (*Par.* IX, 40); 's'inluia' (*Par.* IX, 73); 's'insempra' (*Par.* X, 148); 's'intrea' (*Par.* XIII, 57); 'non s'impola' (*Par.* XXII, 67); 't'inlei' (*Par.* XXII, 127); 'mparadisa' (*Par.* XXVIII, 3); 's'invera' (*Par.* XXVIII, 39); 's'inmilla' (*Par.* XXVIII, 93); 's'interna' (*Par.* XXVIII, 120; *Par.* XXXIII, 85); 's'indova' (*Par.* XXXIII, 138)

The first group (A), under the sign of 'oltraggio', are all words designating extent or measure, which essentially follow the pilgrim's desire as it travels higher and higher, exceeding itself toward '[il] fine di tutt'i disii' (the end of all desire), (*Par.* XXXIII, 46).<sup>13</sup> Linked to the topography of Paradise, these words relate to the transcendence of space and time by the pilgrim/*viator* and the poet's attempts to render this transcendence in language. As we will see, Sereni's poetry is primarily in dialogue with this dimension of Dante's text.

The second group (B), under the sign of 'punto', represent Dante's response to perceiving the miracle of Trinitarian oneness and the Incarnation.<sup>14</sup> All are terms connoting identity, and they deal with the likeness of the figure to the object of discourse; as such, and like the first group, they always imply a relation of desire. Linked to the substance of Paradise, they take language close to its own extinction – toward a languageless state of pure being that would most resemble God Himself as the *punto* at the centre of all creation, of which, to quote Christian Moevs, 'nothing can be said; one can only see it; which is to be it'.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, many of these verbs are reflexives – something which Zanzotto in particular will rework to negative effect in designating an object that, in turning more into itself, simultaneously becomes more other and more closed off to the subject, so that in reality he inverts the relationship of desire with respect to its structure in Dante.

Consequently, it is through linguistic motifs such as these that Dante's language posits a threshold which it continuously transgresses and transcends, always teetering on the edge of aphasia while allowing (poetic) discourse to continue, however distorted or estranging in its effects, all the way to the Empyrean. This is Dante's 'poetics of the sublime', as Piero Boitani has called it, which comes into being between language and its defeat, evoking both extreme joy (often confined to memory, and thus fading) and the tragedy of loss or forgetting (as a result of that which language cannot hold on to or contain, but which poetry *can* perhaps prolong beyond the point where it should have met its limit).<sup>16</sup>

Returning to Sereni and Zanzotto, I want to suggest that they revisit this 'sublime' poetics precisely at the point of fracture between one mode and the other, navigating the abyss between rather than the realm beyond, an abyss which becomes at once the new destination of their poetic and desiring journeys and the most that they can hope to reach or fathom. For Sereni and Zanzotto, the 'point' of 'oltraggio', at which both words and memory fail, comes to represent the inaccessible point that language would try to express but cannot: not God, however, but merely any object that lies beyond the sign system yet is only accessible through it. For the modern poet, this is every object. These tropes become emblematic of the poets' perception of what, following Stefano Agosti, I want to term the 'vanishing point' of language. In the post-structuralist context, this vanishing point is the very essence of language as such: the hole left when the object is pushed to the outside in its substitution by the sign, expressing the impossibility of writing with the support of any higher order or teleology. In Agosti's words:

Il testo poetico sembra indicare *il punto di fuga del linguaggio, il luogo del suo non-ritorno*, o – il che è lo stesso – della dissipazione inesausta del senso: della sua *non-inscrivibilità* in un sistema di valori e di scambi.<sup>17</sup>

As with the Dante-poet's struggles with articulation in *Paradiso*, what is at stake here is something more than merely the problem of ineffability;

it in fact goes to the very heart of the subject's relationship to language and its object (always already in a relation of desire). Whereas Dante will ultimately succeed in making desire coincide with its object, allowing language, however elliptically, to incorporate what lies outside it, Sereni and Zanzotto are progressively estranged from any notion of language or desire as fulfilment, with the result that their desire becomes – on the Lacanian model – ‘an irreducibly three-dimensional structure, infinitely revolving on itself’, a ‘black hole, lined by signifiers, where meaning gets lost’.<sup>18</sup>

So how does this manifest itself in the poems under discussion? And what does it tell us about the different relationship between subjectivity, language, and desire in Dante, Sereni, and Zanzotto? I will endeavour to answer these questions by focusing on a set of verbal constellations in their poems that draw on Dante's language of the *Paradiso* (especially his system of neologisms) while radically transforming them in accordance with the very different landscape of desire in twentieth-century poetry.

#### SERENI'S *UN POSTO DI VACANZA*

I will first consider *Un posto di vacanza* (henceforth *Un posto*), Sereni's poem in seven parts that is often regarded as the summa of his poetic production. First published in 1971, *Un posto* would later form the central section of Sereni's fourth and final book of poetry, *Stella variabile* (1981). As its title suggests, Sereni's poem is constructed around a ‘holiday place’ (*posto di vacanza*) – Bocca di Magra in Liguria – that is also a ‘no place’ or ‘vacuum’ (*posto di vacanza*). Like Dante's *Paradiso*, *Un posto* is a poem that speaks of its own, fraught genesis (it took Sereni almost twenty years to write). However, composed as it is over a gaping, linguistic void, rather than an inexpressible fullness beyond words, it maps the successive but failed attempts by the poetic subject to bridge the abyss between words and things, and between desire and its object. Emblematic of this predicament are the following lines from Part I of *Un posto*, which posit the meaning of language and the poem in a hypothetical space ‘over there’ from which the subject is excluded, which he can only *imagine* occupying in order to *look back* to where he is now, the ‘tra-’ prefix turned from the transcendent to the in-between:

Chissà che di lì *traguardando* non si allacci nome a cosa  
 ... (la poesia sul posto di vacanza).  
 Invece torna a tentarmi in tanti anni quella voce  
 (era un disco) *di là, dall'altra riva*. Nelle sere di polvere e sete  
 quasi la si toccava, gola offerta alla ferita d'amore  
 sulle acque. *Non scriverò questa storia*. [...]  
 (*Un posto* I, 22–27)

As several critics have argued, we can interpret the repeated evocation and negation of what Sereni here terms the 'storia' of his poem ('history', 'narrative', even 'love story') as a metapoetic response to the language debates of the 1950s and 1960s, and especially the debate over the 'possibilità del romanzo' in those years. *Un posto* is indeed a point of culmination for Sereni's meditation and praxis regarding the permeable boundaries between poetry and prose, and as such it epitomizes a general trend in his poetry of this period, which reveals a progressive 'contaminazione' of the lyric framework by a series of narrative voices and especially by narrative techniques such as dialogism and plurivocality.<sup>19</sup> The opening-up of Sereni's poetry towards a more dialogic mode and towards history, particularly from *Gli strumenti umani* (1965) onwards, is generally seen in light of his greater proximity to Dante at this stage in his career. However, this should not preclude the possibility of a dialogue between Sereni and the linguistic universe of Dante's text, including the high poetry of the *Paradiso*, concerning the journey of the writing subject.<sup>20</sup>

Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti has shown, for example, how Sereni's 'incontri con le ombre' (especially the dead) are strongly indebted to the Dantean scheme of the otherworldly encounter, especially in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.<sup>21</sup> However, these 'ombre', like the shade of the writer, Elio Vittorini, whom the poetic 'I' meets in *Un posto* – while often based, in a Dantesque fashion, upon concrete historical individuals – are also 'fantasmi della memoria', incarnations or projections of the subject's desire, and as such are also bound up with the central preoccupation of the poem (and all of Sereni's poetry of the period) with the relationship between word and phantasm, desire and language.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, the 'traghettatore' that passes between 'l'una' and 'l'altra riva' of *Un posto* is an infernal motif that recalls Charon's boat in *Inferno* III, consolidated by an explicit topographic reference to the river that passes between as 'questo acheronte' (*Un posto* II, 37). This river separates the ground occupied by the poetic subject from the 'other



bank'. However that 'other bank' also carries a political value inasmuch as it is occupied by intellectuals of the Left, like Franco Fortini, whose position as one of 'quei parlanti parlanti l e ancora parlanti sull'onda della libertà' (*Un posto* I, 55–56) contrasts dramatically with the poet's own reluctance to speak, or to embrace those discourses. Written partly in response to an epigram by Fortini, which culminated with the words, 'Rischia l'anima. Strappalo, quel foglio l bianco che tieni in mano',<sup>23</sup> Sereni's *Un posto* confronts the personal and collective memory of the past, while establishing its own historico-political and moral framework on the basis of an avowed renunciation or reticence:

Mai la pagina bianca o meno per sé sola invoglia  
 tanto meno qui tra fiume e mare.  
 Nel punto, per l'esattezza, dove un fiume entra nel mare  
 Venivano spifferi in carta dall'altra riva:

*Sereni esile mito*

*filo di fedeltà non sempre giovinezza è verità*

.....

*Strappalo quel foglio bianco che tieni in mano.*

Fogli o carte non c'erano da giocare, era vero. A mani vuote  
 senza messaggio di risposta tornava dall'altra parte il traghettatore.

(*Un posto* I, 9–16)

In fact, the epigram from Fortini is as much about silence and the journey into language (which Sereni largely resists) as it is about commitment or about 'narrativity' in the narrower sense of the word. The desire for passage from one 'side' of the river to the other that structures the poem goes beyond the purely physical to encompass the realm of language itself, and there is arguably a paradisiacal or transcendent impulse present in the poem, which interacts with the infernal scheme to render it both more complex and more interesting. Following Franco Fortini's designation, we should think of Sereni's poem as a "prosa di memoria" o lirica',<sup>24</sup> whose very hybridity implies a tension and a struggle to find an adequate language to express something that does not fit any particular categorization, and that, in a Dantesque fashion, goes beyond all categories.<sup>25</sup> The journey of the poem is also the poetic journey of the writing subject to the furthest reaches of language and desire, to which the supremely Dantesque line, 's'impenna sfavilla si sfa' (*Un posto* III, 29), testifies. This can almost be taken as a syntagm of the whole poem in its passage or turn from the desire for miraculous flight, to gleaming hope, to dissolution. In fact, in the *terzina* with which

Sereni is in dialogue ('e 'l canto di quei lumi era di quelle; l chi non s'impenna sì che là sù voli, l del muto aspetti quindi le novelle', *Par.* X, 73–75), he will ultimately identify most strongly with the earth-bound mute, who speaks and tells of nothing.

As Sereni wrote in a letter to Franco Fortini, meditating on the different destinations of his and Dante's desiring journeys:

Il canto 33 del *Paradiso* non toccherebbe così a fondo il lettore se dietro non ci fosse tutto il viaggio che in quegli attimi giunge al suo terminal [*sic*] (con tutta l'emozione che il viaggiatore ha saputo metterci, fatto tuttavia non trascurabile, *proprio come se nel parlare si voltasse indietro a guardare l'abisso sorvolato*).<sup>26</sup>

Sereni's language also figures this backward look over an abyss, but, unlike Dante, he never succeeds in rising above it. For him the abyss is not the sign of a miraculous distance overcome but rather a pose of harrowing, Orphic loss. Desire for transgression and transcendence, both physical and spiritual, does indeed figure highly in Sereni's poem, but only as an impossibility. As in the *Paradiso*, for the poet, writing becomes the supreme journey, but unlike Dante's voyage it presumes no final destination. The absence of any kind of higher teleology to sustain the subject's course leads to the failure of the journey to find completion and even, at times, to a wilful, textual misdirection that prevents its starting out – the repeated refrain of the poem being, as alluded to above, 'non scriverò questa storia [...] se mai l una storia c'era da raccontare'.<sup>27</sup>

Simultaneously, all hope of finding an adequate language to express this experience is renounced and the poem paradoxically takes shape on the basis of an avowed refusal to speak or metaphorize, a kind of self-imposed aphasia, which the poet terms elsewhere in the poem his 'mutismo' (*Un posto* II, 16). This refusal actually leads the poem to breaking point by the end of Part II (a somewhat premature 'ending' considering that this is a seven-part poem):

qui si rompe il poema sul posto di vacanza  
travolto da tanto mare –  
(*Un posto* II, 60–61)

To borrow a metaphor from Dante's *Paradiso*, Sereni's 'small boat' is not up to the task of sailing these waters.<sup>28</sup> The sea ('gran mar dell'essere') that the subject is on the verge of navigating closes over

him. The poem ‘breaks’ over its object (unable to cover its *materia* adequately) and over the emptiness that language bares as its very heart: a place that is a no-place. Incorporating as well as exorcising the ghost of Dante’s ‘sacrato poema’ (*Par.* XXIII, 62) and ‘poema sacro’ (*Par.* XXV, 1), Sereni’s ‘poema’ can only be ‘una allusione [...] “ironica e antifrastica”’ to its Dantean counterpart in a way that consolidates the distance between them.<sup>29</sup>

In moments such as these, Sereni is almost certainly in dialogue with those passages in the *Paradiso* in which Dante must leave his story untold, where memory or language fails and the poet recoils from the task of describing something so far in excess of what is known: for example, ‘qui l’abbandono’ (*Par.* XVIII, 7–9); ‘qui farem punto’ (*Par.* XXXII, 139–41); ‘A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa’ (*Par.* XXXIII, 142) – all metanarrative reflections that emphasize the limits of expression. However, Sereni’s renunciation is wilful and is ultimately a sign of his resistance to translating the world (more physical than metaphysical) into language.

This leads Sereni to rewrite Dante’s discourse of transition (and his experience of ‘oltraggio’) as one of poetic and psychological impasse. Language explicitly disunifies, rather than unifies, the subject and its object.<sup>30</sup> Both the poet’s desire and his poetic journey are ultimately directed toward finding an object (which is also a word) – ‘amaranto’ – that, in its complete elsewhere-ness or non-existence, comes to represent the literal u-topia of Sereni’s poetic universe. Significantly for our present discussion, this irretrievable ‘point’ in space and time comes to coincide in Sereni’s poem with the ‘punto’ of paradisiacal derivation, here become a symbol of an irrecoverable lack in the self and language:

Mai così – si disse rintanandosi  
tra le ripe lo scriba – mai stato  
così tautologico il lavoro, ma neppure mai  
ostico tanto tra tante meraviglie.  
Guardò lo scafo allontanandosi tra due ali di fresco, 5  
sfucinare nell’alto – e già era fuori di vista, nel turchino,  
rapsodico dattilico fantasticante  
perpetuandosi nell’indistinto di altre estati.  
Amò, semmai servissero al disegno,  
quei transitanti un attimo come persone vive 10  
e intanto  
*sull’omissione il mancamento il vuoto che si pose*  
*tra i dileguati e la sogguardante*

*la farfugliante animula* lì  
 crebbe il mare, si smerigliò il cristallo 15  
 di poco prima, si frantumò  
 e un vetro in corsa di là dalla deriva  
 raggiò sopravento l'ultimo enigma estivo.  
 Passano – tornava a dirsi – tutti assieme gli anni  
 e in *un punto* s'incendiano, che sono io 20  
 custode non di anni ma di attimi  
 - e più nessuno che giungere doveva e era atteso  
 più nessuno verrà sulle acque spopolate.  
 [...]

Di fatto si stremava su un colore 30  
 o piuttosto sul nome del colore da distendere

*sull'omissione, il*  
*mancamento, il vuoto:*  
   *l'amaranto,*  
*luce di stelle spente* che nel raggiungerci ci infuoca 35  
 o quale si riverbera frangendosi su un viso  
 infine ravvisato, mentre la barca vira ...).  
 [...]

Restava, colto a volo, quel colore 40  
 tirrenico, quel nome di radice amara  
*la grama preda dello scriba*  
 stillante altra insonnia dai mille soli  
 d'insonnia luccicante  
 dei marosi.  
 (Un posto IV, 1–23, 30–45)

Thus, by Part IV of the poem, the poetic subject – here designated as the intimately Dantesque figure of 'lo scriba' (*Par.* X, 27) – is revealed to be only 'la farfugliante animula' (*Un posto* IV, 14) of T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem, a 'stuttering [...] simple soul'.<sup>31</sup> Here, language and the poem also 'stutter', and the subject displays a resistance to linguistic transposition, evident in Sereni's excessive use of gerunds and present participles (here underlined), which suspend the signifying chain and leave the subject 'caught' in a textual in-between, somewhere before the level of the elaborate word ('l'amaranto' itself, 38) that could cover the void, but somewhere after the advent of linguistic difference (the loss has always already happened; desire is founded on absence and not presence: 'l'omissione, il mancamento, il vuoto', 12 and 32–33).

'Amaranto' is a colour, but poetically speaking it also finds its 'stem' in the word 'to love' (*amare*) and creates a bridge with the net-

work of verbal forms ending in ‘ante’, which are underlined in the quotation above. These forms are all suspended in a kind of eternal instant, which is not, however, the eternity of Dante’s poem, or of his language in *Paradiso*, but a fixation upon a ‘moment’ of loss – ‘attimo’ (10) – beyond which passage is impossible.<sup>32</sup> As repeated figures of incompleteness, delay, and renunciation, these distorted verb forms mark the place in which the writing subject wears himself out (30), perceiving only the light of ‘dead stars’ (‘luce di stelle spente’, 34). By the end of the passage, the object of desire (which is the very same word, ‘amaranto’) ‘remains’ merely ‘caught in flight’ (‘colto a volo’), suspended beyond any place that the subject could ever reach or claim as his own. As ‘la grama preda dello scriba’ (42), the word ultimately reveals itself to be infernal and not paradisiacal in origin, echoing the mournful sound that emanates from Guido da Montefeltro in *Inf.* XXVII, 13-15, whose distorted language, like the bellowing of the Sicilian bull, ‘dies’ inside since it finds no release: ‘così, per non aver via né forame l dal principio nel foco, in suo linguaggio l si convertian *le parole grame*’. Foregrounding the dissociation of the speaker from his (natural) language, for Sereni, poetry does not mark the joyous coming-together of desire and its object, but only the eternalization of desire as lack.

#### ZANZOTTO’S ‘OLTRANZA OLTRAGGIO’

Zanzotto’s ‘Oltranza oltraggio’, while arriving at a similar conclusion, presents a somewhat different constellation and a different kind of language disorder. If Sereni writes under the sign of a ‘variable star’, we can say that Zanzotto’s constellation is centred upon a supernova or red giant, whose last burst of creative force is also its ultimate destruction, representing a kind of inverse metamorphosis of Dante’s journey from death into life. In Zanzotto’s poetry, we meet aphasia not as the inability or refusal to speak, but as logorrhoea: linguistic excess, verbal prolixity, and an almost endless proliferation of signs without meaning. ‘Siamo un segno senza significato’, he writes in another poem, quoting Hölderlin.<sup>33</sup> Whereas Sereni’s poem maps the crisis of language and the loss of the word, Zanzotto’s represents instead the apotheosis of the sign and the subject’s subordination to it:

'Oltranza oltraggio'  
 Salti saltabecchi friggendo puro-pura  
 nel vuoto spinto outré  
 ti fai più in là  
 intangibile – tutto sommato –  
 tutto sommato 5  
 tutto  
 sei più in là  
 ti vedo nel fondo della mia serachiusascura  
 ti identifico tra i non i sic i sigh  
 ti disidentifico 10  
 solo no solo sì solo  
 piena di punte immite frigida  
 ti fai più in là  
 e sprofondi e strafai sempre più in te  
 fotti il campo 15  
 decedi verso  
 nel tuo sprofondi  
 brilli feroce inconsutile nonnulla  
 l'esplosione l'eclatante e non si sente  
 nulla non si sente 20  
 no sei saltata più in là  
 ricca saltabeccante là

L'oltraggio

As the poem *in limine* that opens Zanzotto's *La Beltà*, 'Oltranza oltraggio' stands as a kind of proem to the collection as a whole, which immediately declares itself to be both under the aegis of Dante's *Paradiso* and radically estranged from it. The notion of *La Beltà* itself, the poet's likely interlocutor here (rhymed *in absentia* with 'là')<sup>34</sup> is the mythical, lost Other of the poetic past that would represent the 'sommo bene'<sup>35</sup> of Zanzotto's poetic universe, but also the alienating force that would constantly exclude the speaking subject from its bounds (elsewhere in *La Beltà* he writes: 'Esser beato – contro me – mi prescrivi ...').<sup>36</sup> *La Beltà*, capitalized to indicate its ideal status (both its sovereignty and the possibility that it is a purely imaginative construct), represents for Zanzotto something like the Paradise of language, from which the subject – always already inhabiting a fallen or post-Babelian realm – is expelled.

Not by chance, much has been written about the relationship of Zanzotto's *La Beltà* to Dante's *Paradiso*, and there has been some discussion of its relationship to the specific condition of aphasia. Rarely,

however, have these two things been discussed together.<sup>37</sup> Gino Rizzo's study, 'Zanzotto, "fabbro del parlar materno"', is an exception to this. He speaks of aphasia in *La Beltà* as a product of 'the ineffable echolalia buried in the psychic patterns of the (lost) beginning' and as the key to fathoming the 'intellectual rigour' that Dante and Zanzotto share in 'their understanding of "poetic function"', as well as the opposing directions of their desiring journeys (Dante's toward metaphysical integration; Zanzotto's toward metaphysical disintegration and the absence of any 'point' of convergence).<sup>38</sup> As a result, *La Beltà* is the place where language shatters outwards or collapses inwards, the place where it becomes entangled in the meshes of desire, exploding or contracting toward its own extinction. As Nicola Gardini states, in this phase of Zanzotto's production, 'words are scattered, raped, broken, and made up, and lines are misplaced, twisted, splayed, fragmented. All idea of syntactical order collapses. [...] Poetry comes into being by way of demolition'.<sup>39</sup>

As Zanzotto wrote in his own notes to 'Oltranza oltraggio', 'oltraggio' for him signifies 'cosa che va oltre la limite, la sopportazione': what goes beyond any sense of limit, what cannot be endured. 'Outrageous', 'unbearable': these are metaphors for the very act of linguistic expropriation figured by the poem, which in its circularity also suggests a closure for the subject that is specified by this failure to embrace an object receding indefinitely from his grasp, more intangible than ever. The 'tu' is language, or the part that evades expression, or the poem itself in its 'oltranza': something that enacts a Fall for the subject more than a path to salvation. Zanzotto faces the opacity of the sign and its failure to give up its meaning, in contradistinction to the essential 'transparency' of Dante's discourse in *Paradiso*, which – as Barolini notes – is, even at its most extreme or abstract, still essentially mimetic, seeking to 'approximate the circling, surging, orgasmic approach of the soul to the fulfilment of its heart's desire'.<sup>40</sup>

The repeated poetic sequence, 'ti fai più in là', which in Zanzotto's poem locks the 'Other' in an exclusive space that remains inaccessible to the 'I', thus revisits Dante's language of identity only negatively. It specifies the process whereby language turns against the subject, representing only mutual closure and impossibility and ejecting the 'I' from the Paradise of language, which it can perhaps see but can never speak about or enter. There is no likeness here, only difference, as evidenced by the series of oxymorons and agrammatical constructions that punctuate the

poem (for example, the passage from ‘ti identifico’ to ‘ti disidentifico’ in the space of just two lines in lines 9–10, or the phrase ‘solo no solo sì’ in line 11). Turning more into itself, the ‘tu’ only becomes more Other. Its ‘strafare’ (14) is also the overstep(ping) of language, the sign of where Zanzotto ‘overdoes it’, here linked in turn, via the sexual connotations of the ‘tu’, to a kind of uncontrollable libido, a primordial chaos.

For Zanzotto, this linguistic chaos, and the violence done to language as it tries to reach a point at which the sign might finally yield its meaning, is an act both of destruction and of creation, or what Agosti terms a ‘creatività negativa’.<sup>41</sup> It spells destruction insofar as it is an attempt to decimate the corrupted, fallen language that the poet is condemned to speak as a result of linguistic degeneration and the horrors of history and linguistic change (not by chance, echoing Dante’s position in the *De vulgari eloquentia*).<sup>42</sup> But it is also an act of creation, insofar as it seeks to rebuild language from the ground up, recuperating the original event of language out of silence – the babble of the infant, or what Zanzotto elsewhere terms in his Venetian dialect, ‘petèl’.<sup>43</sup> But, unlike in Dante’s *Paradiso*, there is no redemption of language here – or, to put it in Barthesian terms, ‘in the realm of speech *there is no innocence*, no safety’.<sup>44</sup> Zanzotto’s language remains, to use his own designation of it, a ‘rischio lingua’, where something is born but also dies, and where the child’s babble is also a ‘vociferazione *babelica*’, a sign of imminent linguistic difference and exclusion from the realm of pure maternal unity:

Il tentativo di esperienza poetica è dunque connesso ad un ‘*rischio lingua*’, in cui non solo è presente la necessità di sentire le ‘frequenze’, le ‘vocazioni’ intime di questa lingua, le correnti e i vortici che la abitano, ma anche la consapevolezza che tutte queste forze nell’atto stesso in cui costituiscono una lingua la ‘chiudono’, la danno come *campo di esclusione*, di frammentazione, entro lo schema babelico. Per questo esiste in ogni poeta la nostalgia verso una lingua che sia universale, non ‘*idiomatica*’, anche se pure sempre ‘*materna-propria*’.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, if Sereni displays a resistance to entering language, we can say that Zanzotto’s language has already gone too far – or that he is too far into it, which amounts to the same thing. ‘Nostalgia’, as he puts it, is nostalgia for a place *outside*: for an intact, maternal and universal language that is properly mimetic, rather than figural (idiomatic), but as such unattainable. Instead of this, he finds that signs merely generate other signs with no hope of an escape from the verbal labyrinth.



It is highly significant in this respect that the poetic experience of *La Beltà* should finally lead the poet not to Dante but to Petrarch. The ‘dolenti mie parole estreme’ of Petrarch’s *canzone* CXXVI, quoted in the last poem of *La Beltà*, entitled ‘E la madre-norma’, indicate that the ultimate point of ‘extremity’ and ‘oltraggio’, for Zanzotto, will finally be revealed as *internal* to the subject and his language.<sup>46</sup> As the words spoken, like Petrarch’s, by an essentially posthumous and solipsistic self, this language – which is all language, for Zanzotto – promises death and not rebirth.

If Sereni’s poetic quest in *Un posto* is thus centred on the desire for a word that cannot be found (‘amaranto’), Zanzotto’s in *La Beltà* is primarily a quest for a thing (Thing?) beyond words that remains inaccessible.<sup>47</sup> In both cases, language stalls – either because it can speak nothing (Sereni) or speak of nothing (Zanzotto). The distortions played upon language and the speaking subject are ‘*per-tras-versioni*’ *dantesche* insofar as they ‘turn’ the modern poet ‘aside’ from the ‘true path’, privileging a poetic wandering (‘errare’) that is the infinite way of/to desire, also marking their divergence from any conception of desire as fulfilment. For these two twentieth-century poets, there is no coming together of the self or language, and what they both face is the condition in which – to again quote Kristeva – ‘all translatability becomes impossible’.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, this has less to do with the difficulty of describing an object that is not an object, whose meaning is always *outside* language (God, in Dante’s scheme), than with the predicament of a subject that is trapped and exiled *within language*, unable to retrieve or even conceive of a space outside it.

In Dante’s *Paradiso*, it is not that the poet’s language has misplaced its origin – it in fact moves ever closer to that goal – but merely that it cannot fully remember or express it. For Sereni and Zanzotto, on the other hand, the point of origin is itself lost, tainted, or forgotten. For the modern poet, there can be no Paradise in/of language, perhaps not even the memory of it; he is left navigating the indefinite realm of the in-between, which edges the poem ever further toward nothingness and leaves the subject in limbo. In Zanzotto’s words:

ma invece qua davanti s’avvalla il terrain vague  
*il grande interregno*  
 [...]

Tanto, *in questo fondo*,  
resta del processo di verbalizzazione del mondo.<sup>49</sup>

And in Dante's: 'che senza speme vivemo in disio' (*Inf.* IV, 42).

#### NOTES

- 1 I borrow the term 'per-tras-versioni' from Zanzotto's 'Profezie o memorie o giornali murali', V, lines 3–11 in *La Beltà*, in Andrea Zanzotto, *Le poesie e prose scelte*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco and Gian Mario Villalta (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 324: 'Perché tutte queste iperbellezze | ipereternità sono | tutte sanissime e strette in solido | ma vagamente trasverse perverse | indicano spunti di lievi o grosse *per-tras-versioni* | madrinature ognuna fantastizzanti | seduzioni censure, o altri innesti clivaggi, | il loro afrore in stagione o fuori stagione | abbacina allergizza – e poi eritemi sfavillanti'. Throughout the essay, italics are mine unless otherwise stated.
- 2 Vittorio Sereni, *Un posto di vacanza*, first published in *L'Almanacco dello Specchio*, 1 (1971), then republished in *libretto* form by Scheiwiller (Milan: All'Insegna del Pesce d'Oro, 1973), now in *Poesie*, ed. by Dante Isella, 4th edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), pp. 223–33, from which quotations are taken; Andrea Zanzotto, 'Oltranza oltraggio', in *La Beltà* (1968), in *Le poesie e prose scelte*, p. 267. The edition of Dante's *Commedia* to which I refer is '*La Commedia*' secondo l'antica vulgata, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, Società Dantesca Italiana, Edizione Nazionale, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).
- 3 On this notion of aphasia, especially as it relates to poetic language in Dante's *Commedia*, see Elena Lombardi's excellent discussion in *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), especially pp. 157–60 and pp. 191–93. Here, she also summarizes Roman Jakobson's theoretical study of aphasia in 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,' in *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 69–96. On the significance of aphasia in the Earthly Paradise cantos of Dante's *Purgatorio*, see Francesca Southerden, 'Lost for Words: Recuperating Melancholy Subjectivity in Dante's Eden', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 193–210.
- 4 The notion of 'resemanticization' comes from Gino Rizzo's article, 'Zanzotto, "fabbro del parlar materno"', in *The Selected Poetry of Andrea Zanzotto*, ed. and trans. by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 307–27 (p. 320).
- 5 On this point, see Teodolinda Barolini on the 'lyrical' mode of *Paradiso* as representing 'nothing less than Dante's attempt to forge an oxymoron, an adynaton, a paradox: namely linguistic/diegetic *uguaglianza*, "equalized" language', in her *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 10.

- sity Press, 1992), p. 221. See also Piero Boitani's commentary on *Par.* XXXIII, 94–96, in which he writes that '[t]he Argo is not just the ship of myth. However obliquely, it alludes to the vessel of Dante pilgrim and poet sailing through God's ocean. It is this ship that has now become a shadow, for this is the price one must pay to express what is ineffable and the prize one gets for doing so. By fading away at their own boundary, human words can, in the present wondering oblivion, try to tell that which man "neither can nor knows how to relate"'; "L'acqua che ritorna eguale": Dante's sublime', in *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 250–78 (p. 278). Finally, see Robert Hollander's notes to *Par.* XXXIII, 58–66, 'After, in the last tercet, understating the fact that he saw God, he now turns not to one simile, but to three of them, in order to express the nature of his loss', in Dante Alighieri, *Comedy*, trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, 3 vols (New York: Doubleday, 2000–07), III, p. 833.
- 6 This is essentially Jacques Lacan's view of the relationship between language and desire, which coincides with the birth of the speaking subject, as outlined in his *Écrits*. See, in particular, 'Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien', in *Écrits II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), pp. 273–308. Zanzotto engages directly with Lacanian theories such as these in *La Beltà*, whilst Sereni's poetry invites an interpretation along psychoanalytic lines in virtue of the way in which it maps the vicissitudes of the speaking and desiring subject. The latter will be discussed in detail in Francesca Southerden, *Landscapes of Desire in the Poetry of Vittorio Sereni* (in progress).
  - 7 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 33. The original French text is available as *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).
  - 8 See Teodolinda Barolini, 'Problems in Paradise: The Mimesis of Time and the Paradox of *più e meno*', in *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 166–93.
  - 9 'The inner language of paradise [...] is a language of "things" as opposed to words, and is therefore incomprehensible to the pilgrim until it meets the sign of human intellect' (Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*, pp. 153–54).
  - 10 'Condescension is a performance staged by the blessed souls to meet Dante's shortcomings, the limitation of the sign' (Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*, p. 154).
  - 11 The Ulyssean enterprise implicit in this canticle, in the presumption and 'impresa' of the poet as *scriba Dei* is discussed in detail by Barolini, noting the danger that this implies, which is of a very different order to that involved in writing *Inferno*. In *Inferno*, Dante-poet 'may well be [...] meditating on the perils of bestial signs and dead speech, but he is not in personal danger of being stopped, derailed. Much more dangerous, from the point of view of the writer writing, is the *Paradiso*' (*The Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 166).
  - 12 Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 221.
  - 13 Cf. *Par.* XXXIII, 46–48: 'E io ch'al fine di tutt' i disii l'appropinquava, sì com'io dovea, l'ardor del desiderio in me finii'.

- 14 For 'punto', in addition to *Par.* XXXIII, 94–96, quoted earlier, see especially *Par.* XVII, 16–18, 'così vedi le cose contingenti l' anzi che sieno in sé, mirando il punto l' a cui tutti li tempi son presenti'; *Par.* XVIII, 13–15, 'Tanto poss' io di quel punto ridire, l' che, rimirando lei, lo mio affetto l' libero fu da ogni altro disire'; *Par.* XXVIII, 94–96, 'Io sentiva osannar di coro in coro l' al punto fisso che li tiene a li ubi, l' e terrà sempre, ne' quai sempre fuoro'; and *Par.* XXX, 10–12, 'Non altrimenti il trionfo che lude l' sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse l' parendo inchiuso da quel ch'elli 'nchiude' (which is a clear echo of the counter-'punto' of *Inf.* V, 130–32, 'Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse l' quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso; l' ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse'). In addition, 'punto' in *Paradiso* takes on a decidedly metapoetic function in *Par.* XXX, 22–24, 'Da questo passo vinto mi concedo l' più che già mai da punto di suo tema l' soprato fosse comico o tragedo'; and *Par.* XXXII, 139–41, 'Ma perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna, l' qui farem punto, come buon sartore l' che com' elli ha del panno fa la gonna', which indicates the extent to which it is also bound up for Dante with the possibilities and limits of poetic language in describing the transcendent being that is God.
- 15 Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's 'Comedy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 167.
- 16 See Piero Boitani, 'The Sibyl's leaves: Reading *Paradiso* XXXIII', in *The Tragic and the Sublime*, pp. 223–49 (pp. 242–43), in which he writes of attempt to render the celestial vision of *Par.* XXXIII, 85–93: 'And the tensions of language are there, at the centre of the poet's awareness: his impotence ("che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume") finds a counterpart in his joy ("perché più di largo, l' dicendo questo, mi sento ch'i'godo").'
- 17 See Stefano Agosti, 'Su un verso di Pascoli: Calcoli della tessitura sonora ed effetti a-significanti', in *Critica della testualità: strutture e articolazioni nel senso dell'opera letteraria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), pp. 253–57 (p. 257).
- 18 Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*, p. 195.
- 19 Giovanna Cordibella has very effectively illustrated the cross-fertilization that occurs in the material of Sereni's poem with narrative texts such as Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*. See Giovanna Cordibella, 'Contaminazioni: Il caso di *Un posto di vacanza*', in *Di fronte al romanzo: Contaminazioni nella poesia di Vittorio Sereni* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2004), pp. 71–101.
- 20 Studies such as Anna Dolfi's 'Dante e i poeti del Novecento', *Studi danteschi*, 58 (1986), pp. 307–42; Adelia Noferi's 'Dante e il Novecento', *Studi danteschi*, 48 (1971), pp. 185–209; and Silvio Ramat's 'Il Novecento e una traccia dantesca', *Forum italicum*, 4.3 (1970), pp. 311–30, emphasize Dante's value as a model of *plurilinguismo* and historical objectivity – for twentieth-century poetry in general and for Sereni in particular – as an alternative to the linguistic selectivity and high lyricism of the Petrarchan poetic universe, which was still in play in parts of Sereni's first two collections, *Frontiera* (1941) and *Diario d'Algeria* (1947). A more detailed analysis of Sereni's intertextual dialogue with Dante can be found in Luigi Scorrano's 'Dantismo trasversale di Vittorio Sereni', *Alighieri*:

- Rassegna Bibliografica Dantesca*, n.s., 40.14 (July–December 1999), pp. 41–76, and Pierluigi Pellini's 'Brevi note su Dante nella poesia del Novecento italiano con una lettura sereniana', in *Le toppe della poesia: Saggi su Montale, Sereni, Fortini, Orelli* (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 1994), pp. 171–99.
- 21 Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, 'Gli incontri con le ombre', in *La poesia di Vittorio Sereni: atti del convegno*, ed. by Stefano Agosti et al. (Milan: Librex, 1985), pp. 68–90.
  - 22 On the relationship between word and phantasm, going back to medieval models of desire, see Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze: la parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981). On aspects of this topic in relation to Sereni, see Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Il solido nulla', in *La tradizione del Novecento: nuova serie* (Florence: Valecchi, 1987), pp. 377–86, and my forthcoming *Landscapes of Desire* (see note 6 above).
  - 23 Franco Fortini, 'Sereni esile mito' (1954), in *L'Ospite ingrato* (Bari: De Donati, 1966), p. 16.
  - 24 Franco Fortini, 'Un posto di vacanza' (1972), in *Saggi italiani* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), pp. 189–203 (p. 191).
  - 25 On Dante's language and poetics in the *Paradiso* as going beyond all categories, particularly binary oppositions, see Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati, 'Dante after Wittgenstein: "Aspetto", Language and Subjectivity from *Convivio* to *Paradiso*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism*, ed. by Fortuna, Gragnolati, and Trabanti, pp. 223–48.
  - 26 Vittorio Sereni, letter to Franco Fortini, dated 8 December 1963, preserved as part of the poet's correspondence in Biblioteca Comunale, Luino, Archivio Vittorio Sereni, APS VII 24 (L 1276).
  - 27 See *Un posto* I, 27, repeated in II, 11–12, culminating in VII, 16–24.
  - 28 Cf. *Par.* II, 1–3: 'O voi che siete in piccioletta barca, l desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti l dietro al mio legno che cantando varca'.
  - 29 Giovanna Gronda, 'Un posto di vacanza: iuxta propria principia', in *Tradizione traduzione società: saggio per Franco Fortini*, ed. by Romano Luperini (Rome: Edizioni Riuniti, 1989), pp. 177–203 (p. 187, n. 26), cited in Cordibella, *Di fronte al romanzo*, p. 76.
  - 30 Cf. *Un posto* I, 40, 'Ma intanto si disuniva la bella sera sul mare ...'.
  - 31 See Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Animula', originally in *Ariel Poems*, in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 101–02.
  - 32 On this linguistic point, see Giovanna Gronda, 'Un posto di vacanza: iuxta propria principia', p. 183, and Cordibella, pp. 90–91. See also Kristeva, who writes of the melancholy condition: 'Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy, a moment blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective. Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future'. *Black Sun*, p. 60.
  - 33 See Zanzotto, 'Sì, ancora la neve', in *La Beltà*, pp. 273–76.

- 34 See the notes to this poem in *Le poesie e prose scelte*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco, p. 1487.
- 35 Cf. *Par.* III, 88–90; *Par.* VII, 79–81; *Par.* XIV, 46–48; *Par.* XIX, 85–87; *Par.* XXVI, 133–35; and Francesca Cadel's view that 'In Zanzotto e nel suo Novecento la scommessa aperta con Dante e con la tradizione poetica italiana, si gioca tutta nell'oltranza del linguaggio impegnato nella volontà di esprimere l'I/O, il "sommo bene"', in her 'L'oltranza della parola': il "Paradiso" nella poesia di Andrea Zanzotto', *Semicerchio*, 24/25 (2001), pp. 59–63 (p. 62).
- 36 'Alla stagione', in *Le poesie e prose scelte*, pp. 277–79 (pp. 278–79).
- 37 See, for example, Cadel, 'L'oltranza della parola'; and Stefano Agosti, 'Zanzotto o la conquista del dire', in *Il testo poetico: teoria e pratiche d'analisi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1972), pp. 211–18.
- 38 Rizzo, 'Zanzotto, "fabbro del parlar materno"', pp. 318–19. Referring to the divergence between Dante and Zanzotto with respect to the metaphysics of language, Rizzo writes that 'what is missing [in Zanzotto] is precisely the *point* of convergence – whether at the top of the "sublimizing cone" of history (poetry included), or at the bottom of the subliminal, emblematically represented by "petèl" – for the very hiatus sign/object, assumed as the premise of this poetic operation, precludes it by de-finition' (p. 313; italics in the original). Whereas 'the polysemous density of Dante's word-Word predicates its cohesion on the vertical, historical relation of the symbol to the "thing" it symbolizes', for Zanzotto 'the referentiality of the image disintegrates and the sign regains its own autology' (ibid., pp. 317–18).
- 39 Nicola Gardini, 'Linguistic Dilemma and Intertextuality in Contemporary Italian Poetry: The Case of Andrea Zanzotto', *Forum Italicum*, 35.2 (Fall 2002), pp. 432–41 (p. 435).
- 40 Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 252.
- 41 Agosti, 'Zanzotto o la conquista del dire', p. 218.
- 42 See *De vulgari eloquentia* I, ix, 6, in which Dante writes, 'Cum igitur omnis nostra loquela – preter illam homini primo concreatam a Deo – sit a nostro beneplacito reparata post confusionem illam que nil aliud fuit quam prioris oblivio, et homo sit instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal, nec durabilis nec continua esse potest, sed sicut alia que nostra sunt, puta mores et habitus, per locorum temporumque distantias variari oportet' ('Since, therefore, all our language (except that created by God along with the first man) has been assembled, in haphazard fashion, in the aftermath of the great confusion that brought nothing else than oblivion to whatever language had existed before, and since human beings are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can neither be durable nor consistent with itself, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time'). Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 20–21.
- 43 See especially the centrally placed poem of *La Beltà* entitled 'L'elegia in petèl', pp. 315–17, in which the poet, reflecting on language, writes: 'Là origini – Mai

- c'è stata origine. | Ma perché allora in finezza e albore tu situi | la non scrivibile e inevitata elegia in petèl?' (lines 10–12, p. 315).
- 44 'Nothing [is] to be done: language is always a matter of force, to speak is to exercise a will to power; in the realm of speech *there is no innocence*, no safety'. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 192.
- 45 Andrea Zanzotto, 'Tentativi di esperienze poetiche: poetiche-lampo', in *Le poesie e prose scelte*, pp. 1309–19 (p. 1314).
- 46 '[...] e mi poemizzo a ogni cosa e insieme | *dolenti mie parole estreme* | sempre ogni volta parole estreme | insieme esercito in pugna folla cattiva o angelica: state'. p. 348. Cf. Francesco Petrarca, canzone CXXVI, 'Chiare, fresche et dolci acque', line 13, in *Canzoniere*, ed. by Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1992).
- 47 The 'Thing' is that which Lacan and Kristeva, in their respective theories of language and desire, refer to as *la Chose*, derived from Freud's concept of *das Ding*. As Lacan writes, 'The Thing is characterized by the fact that it is impossible for us to imagine it': it is the beyond of signification, or what rests permanently outside language. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60*, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 12. It would be interesting to consider how far Zanzotto's poetry engages with this supra-linguistic dimension.
- 48 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 42.
- 49 'Profezie o memorie o giornali murali', XVI, pp. 341–43.

Francesca Southerden, "Per-tras-versioni" dantesche: Post-Paradisiacal Constellations in the Poetry of Vittorio Sereni and Andrea Zanzotto', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 153–74 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02\\_10](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_10)>

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